Between Mars and Venus: Transatlantic strategic cultures and Canadian Earthlings?

Benjamin Zyla *

A few years ago Robert Kagan surprised analysts of transatlantic affairs with a thought-provoking article that succinctly summarized the level of tensions in light of America’s global assertiveness after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 9/11. The essence of his argument was twofold: first, the EU and the US have strategically grown apart and second, the Europeans have become accustomed to a peaceful European continent. Based on Roman mythology, Kagan asserted that the European are from Venus (representing the Roman god of love) while the US is from Mars (the god of war). In Kagan’s mind, the level of peace and comfort accustomed societies in Europe to low levels of defence spending and thus military capabilities, while the US consistently maintained powerful, capable, and determined military institutions of war. Because of these differences, so Kagan, the EU and the US do not share a common strategic culture any more.1

However, if the EU and the US have strategically grown apart, what can we say about Canada’s strategic location in transatlantic as being a country that has shared long strategic relationship with both?2 Its history of strategic thought showed a strong predisposition towards issues of European security while being confronted with a geopolitical proximity to the US in North America.3 Both factors shaped its strategic thinking, and provides meaning to the ongoing strategic debates surrounding NATO’s campaign in Afghanistan.

I will answer the above research question by way of examining the strategic cultures of the EU, the US, and Canada between 2001-2009 through their national security strategies.4 Comparative studies on strategic culture(s) are rare, and most of them concentrate on individual country studies without making regional or cross-regional comparisons.5 Specifically, strategic cultures allow us to examine states’ material and the ideational factors (such as norms, values, and identity) informing foreign policy decisions, and thus provides meaning of particular social actions regarding national security issues in the post-9/11 world order.6

I argue that Canada’s strategic culture can, defined as “the idea that each political community has a particular and individual approach to security policy”, neither be unquestionably identified with either the Mars or the Venus camp. It is influenced normatively by unique American as well as European predispositions of national security (such as values, commonly held beliefs, socially accepted principles) that are deeply rooted in history as well as collective cultural experiences. However, the extent of shared normative security values and commonly held belief systems with the EU appear to be greater than those held with the U.S. Consequently, those deeply ingrained value and belief systems carry a greater promise to be more enduring than the habitual Canada-US security practices. In short, these (behavioural) predispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes that are not governed by formal rules. That is to say that Canada and the EU are strategically closer to one another than one might think.

It is against this theoretical backdrop that I focus on what the three security strategies display worldviews, mandates, and the role of international organizations in global politics.

I. Worldview

The United States perceived itself as the winner of the Cold War leading to ‘the end of history’ and making the US the sole hegemon in world politics.7 In contrast, Europe’s integration process has given meaning to its perceptions of peace, security, and prosperity in Europe since the late 1950s. As Jolyon Howorth noted, “the EU has been constructed through peace and dialogue”8, and mandated the EU to export the process of European integration9 to other regions of the world.10 while at the same time downgrading the importance attributed to the use of force or instruments of military statecraft to a bare minimum.11 The primary security objective of the EU therefore was to maintain its economic capability and to export the values of a market economy across continental Europe.12

September 11th reminded Canadians of their complex strategic location in transatlantic affairs.13 Since 1867 Canada has been conceived as being a ‘European country’ by sharing cultural norms, principles, and demography with Europe. Its federation was built on the foundations of French settlers who began a new life in what was later called Lower Canada. Second, geographically speaking, Canada was bound to share the continent with the United States. The veracity of this geographical actuality was particularly pertinent in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 when Ottawa was increasingly confronted with a bellicose neighbour. In this collective U.S. sentiment of insecurity and vulnerability14, Canada felt the prioritization of defending and enforcing the world’s “longest undefended frontier”15 against potential terrorists infiltrating either country. Put differently, because of this extensive economic interdependence with the United States, social pressures were levied upon Canada by the US government to step up its commitment for the defence of the North American continent: security trumped trade after 9/1116, and Canada could not afford to become a strategic liability to the US.17

II. Mandates

First, the NSS was not fettered by regional limitations, and advocated a global role for the US that rested on a normative dictum of a distinctly...
US internationalism. Second, America was to fight a global war against terrorism; if necessary pre-emptively. While hunting terrorists, exporting values such as democracy, the rule of law, and freedom abroad, “the United States seeks to extend freedom across the globe [...]”. These normative ambitions were conjoined with the policy of regime change—that was, to change corrupt and dictatorial regimes that suppressed their own people, and to turn them into prosperous democracies.

Like the NSS, the ESS also provided an activist interpretation of security. Yet, Europe’s ambitions were more regionally focused on the immediate European neighbourhood, and the normative predisposition that successful European integration policies were a key ingredient that made the EU “so prosperous, so secure and so free”. Consequently, the chief mandate of the EU was to export this prosperity and to help build that European neighborhood. Acting pre-emptively was believed to be illegal, so was acting militarily without the explicit endorsement of the UN. The use of force was seen as the last resort, and highlighted the importance of civilian crisis management capabilities (policing, the rule of law, strengthening civilian administration, negotiation and consultation as the primary tools for addressing conflicts).

III. Third Parties and International Organizations

The EU cherished the values of multilateralism and acting in concert with other like-minded states. Notwithstanding these commonly held beliefs, Sten Rynning argues that the EU did not hesitate to use force if all channels of diplomacy were exhausted, and thus contradicts Kagan’s assertions that the EU shies away from using military force.

By contrast, while America’s allies and friends were invited to join the US in its efforts, Washington reserved the right to act unilaterally. US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, put it succinctly: “When it comes to our security we really don’t need anybody’s permission”. So-called ‘coalitions of the willing’ replaced long-standing alliances, at least temporarily, which has been coined ‘multilateralism à la carte’.

For Canada multilateralism was seen a guarantor of a rules-based and predictable international system and provided international legitimacy. Normatively, multilateralism was the foundation of Canadian internationalism. It has been the core principle of Canadian foreign policy, and Ottawa has a legacy of establishing and endorsing international institutions and the rule of law.

Conclusion

Before 9/11 North America was a “geostategic backwater” for NATO. For decades, the epicentre of its security interests was located in Western Europe. With the terrorist attacks on 9/11 this narrative was about to change while a new meaning was given to North America as a continent.

By using strategic culture, the essay examined the question whether Canada’s strategic culture showed a normative convergence with either the Europeans, or the Americans, or both. While both the European as well as the Canadian security strategy were delivered in response to 9/11 and the NSS of 2002, the article finds that Canada’s strategic culture could not be judged as belonging to one particular camp—that is neither Mars nor Venus. Perhaps it is better described as the Earthlings—that is in between Mars and Venus. Indeed, a normative convergence was apparent in each of the three selected issue sectors that this article examined—that the actors geostrategic predispositions in world politics, mandates, and the role of international organizations.

Regarding the first category, Canada’s close geographical proximity to the United States and its new predispositions (or meanings) of national security in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 affected Canada’s role perception in North America primarily by realizing that it could not become a strategic liability to the United States. Against this backdrop, the immediacy of addressing the new American-felt insecurity aligned Canada closer with American beliefs about the international security governance, and supports the commonly held wisdom that Canada views the world through the prism of the US.
Notes

3) Ibid., 4.
4) I acknowledged that the argument and the analysis are somewhat simplified as the Canadian and American security strategy is national strategies, whereas the EU’s is a supranational strategy that reflects the views of all European countries. It is also noted here that there are methodological difficulties here in comparing two state-based security strategies with that of a supranational organization. However, since Europe’s foreign and defence policy remains highly intergovernmental as opposed to supranational, this approach appears to be justified.
5) While the European settlers who crossed the ocean from Europe to Canada has shown a strong transatlantic interest in European affairs since 1602. For an argument of France’s influence on Canadian strategic policy, see for example, forthcoming David G. Haglund and Justin Massie, “Canada’s Reemergence of France in Quebec’s and Canada’s Strategic Cultural Tourism,” Quebec Studies 49 (2010). For a good discussion on the geopolitical proximity to the United States see, for example, Charles F. Doran, Forged Partnership: U.S.-Canada Relations today (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).
6) Joël Sokolsky, The Future of Canadian-American defence relations: trends in U.S. strategy and the Canadian defence posture, Centre for International Relations occasional paper, no. 10 (Kingston, Ont.: Centre for International Relations Queen’s University, 1986).
8) Joël Sokolsky, “Canada’s Reemergence of France in Quebec’s and Canada’s Strategic Cultural Tourism,” Quebec Studies 49 (2010). For an excellent discussion on the geopolitical proximity to the United States see, for example, Charles F. Doran, Forged Partnership: U.S.-Canada relations today (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).
8 Space does not allow us to discuss the 4 generations of strategic cultures. A good summary can be found in Benjamin Zyla, „Überfall oder Opposition? EU und NATO’S Strategic (Sub-)Culture”, Towards a European Strategic Culture? A Constructivist Framework for Explaining Changing Norms,” European Journal of International Relations 11, no. 4 (2005).
9 Richard Whitman, “Road Map for a Route March? (De-)civilizing through the EU’s Security Stratey, “ (Brussels: European Council, 2003), 7. On NATO’s transatlantic gap, see Sokolsky, “Canada, the United States and NATO: A Tale of Two Pillars.”
11 Benjamin Zyla, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor (tenure-track)
University of Ottawa, Canada
School of International Development & Global Studies

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Schloßgasse 6, A-2344 Maria Enzersdorf
Tel. +43 (0)2236 411 96, Fax. +43 (0)2236 411 96-9
E-Mail: office@aies.at, www.aies.at

Layout: EGENCY Medienbüro Patrick Meyer

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